



# Nontuberculous Mycobacteria

## **What is a nontuberculous mycobacteria?**

Both the Tuberculosis (TB) germ and several other germs are called mycobacteria. Germs other than TB are called nontuberculous mycobacteria (NTM). These NTM germs are found all around us in dust, soil, water, milk, food and in some domestic and wild animals.

## **How are NTM germs "caught"?**

The NTM germs may enter the body through the lungs by breathing, through the gut by eating or drinking or through the skin by a cut or wound being contaminated by water or dirt containing NTM germs. NTM germs are not "caught" from another person. People who have an NTM in their sputum cannot transmit infection due to the NTM to another person.

## **Does this germ mean I have disease?**

Not necessarily, finding NTM in sputum does not indicate disease. NTM are found frequently in patients with a chronic cough, such as smokers, and in patients with lung disease, such as COPD or emphysema. These germs can be present and live in body secretions, like sputum, without causing disease. If you are a smoker or have COPD or emphysema, the presence of an NTM in your sputum probably is not important. Your doctor may indicate no treatment is necessary.

## **What is nontuberculous mycobacterial disease?**

When an NTM causes disease the symptoms and x-ray changes may seem just like those of TB. You cannot have disease without symptoms, such as: a cough lasting longer than 3 weeks, blood in the sputum, weight loss, night sweats or fever. For pulmonary disease, your chest x-ray will be abnormal, like TB. NTM disease can be found in lymph glands in the neck in children. NTM disease occurs frequently in persons who are HIV infected or have a damaged immune system for some other reason. An NTM germ should be found in two or more cultures in a patient with symptoms and an abnormal chest x-ray before NTM disease is thought to be present. Disease caused by an NTM is called mycobacteriosis. If significant symptoms are present, treatment will be necessary.

## **Does the presence of NTM germ mean I don't have TB?**

Perhaps some patients have both the TB germ and an NTM germ. For persons who have "positive" TB skin tests, the health department TB doctor may have diagnosed you with TB infection or inactive TB disease. You may need treatment for the TB infection or inactive TB disease as recommended by the TB doctor, even though an NTM grew in your sputum.